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Surviving the Perfect Storm

A true story of USAA members against the raging sea

story by Mark F. Soupiset

"We're going to set up for a planned ditching," he tells his crew. "We're going to ditch while we still can." And then Dave Ruvola drops the nose of the helicopter and starts racing his fuel gauge down to the sea."
— from *The Perfect Storm* by Sebastian Junger

Last summer's release of *The Perfect Storm*, a movie depicting the true story of the swordfishing boat *Andrea Gail* and its disappearance at sea, introduced millions of theatergoers to the terror and violence wreaked by the massive meteorological disaster that churned the North Atlantic in late October 1991.

Hundreds of miles southwest of the doomed *Andrea Gail*, USAA members Lt. Col. David Ruvola and Lt. Col. Graham Buschor learned about the storm first hand. The pair — both helicopter pilots at that time with the 106th Rescue Wing of the New York Air National Guard — were called upon to help save a civilian on a sinking sailboat 250 miles off the New Jersey coast. Their story of courage in the face of life-threatening danger was told in gripping detail by Sebastian Junger, author of the best-selling novel, *The Perfect Storm*. A composite story of several such real-life rescues by the Air National Guard and U.S. Coast Guard also became a subplot in the movie.

Rescue aborted

Late on the afternoon of October 30, 1991, with co-pilot Buschor at his side, Ruvola flew an Air National Guard H-60 helicopter over the thundering sea in near-total darkness toward the stranded vessel. The crew included flight engineer Jim Mioli and two pararescue jumpers (known as "PJs"), John Spillane and Rick Smith. After two mid-air refuelings from a C-130 tanker plane and more than an hour of flying into the worst weather they had ever faced, the H-60 crew was unable to attempt the rescue.

"We were looking down at 30- to 40-foot seas and the winds were 40 to 50 knots," says Ruvola. "We didn't know whether or not a PJ dropped into the water would be able to make it onto the boat, and whether or not we'd be able to get him back off the boat. The hoist operator was concerned that — because of the size of the wave-swells — the cable could be snapped while hoisting someone back into the helicopter.

"All considered, we decided to allow the C-130 that was overhead to drop survival gear [to the stranded sailor] and head for home," Ruvola explains. Fortunately, the crew of a Romanian freighter eventually pulled the man to safety. But because of a fluke communication mix-up earlier that day, Ruvola didn't have the necessary weather information to prevent what would happen next.

A band of rain 80 miles long and 50 miles wide was closing in on the H-60 as it made its way west toward home. At 8 p.m., Ruvola was attempting to connect with the C-130 to refuel when the helicopter hit a wall of 75-knot headwinds.

"It was very, very turbulent and we were trying to find smoother air to complete the final refueling," recalls Ruvola. "We continued to climb and even descend below the clouds. At one point, we were 500 feet above the water and you could see the ragged, bottom edge of the clouds mixing on the horizon with the whitewater of the ocean." Visibility was so bad inside the clouds that, on occasion, Ruvola was unable to see the C-130's wings directly in front of him.

An hour-and-a-half later, after 30 harrowing attempts between 4,500 feet and 300 feet made unbelievably difficult by weather-damage to the C-130's left-hand fuel drogue, the H-60 had only 20 minutes of fuel remaining. Unable to complete the refueling maneuver, Ruvola made the fateful and necessary decision to ditch into the Atlantic.

Co-pilot Buschor issued a mayday over the radio's emergency frequency and alerted the Coast Guard cutter *Tamaroa*, a few miles to the northeast. "I remember very vividly my call for help," says Buschor. "I was painting the *Tamaroa* on our radar, so I knew it was only 12 miles away. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough fuel to go that far.

"The *Tamaroa* responded almost immediately and told us to head toward them. We knew the number one engine was about to roll off-line because of fuel starvation," Buschor says. "I remember telling the *Tamaroa*, 'Negative, negative, we are ditching right here!'"

Into the ocean

At an altitude of 200 feet, the H-60 pierced the bottoms of the clouds and, from a hovering position just above the wave crests, Ruvola told his crew that ditching was imminent. While the crew prepared to abandon the helicopter, Ruvola's primary concern was to make sure the massive helicopter didn't hit them on the way down.

Moments after Ruvola gave the order to bail out, Buschor, Smith and Spillane — in that order — jumped into the howling storm. Smith and Spillane, without the aid of night-vision goggles, didn't know how far they would fall because of the 80 foot waves below them. If they hit crests, they would have dropped just 10 feet or so. As it turned out, both likely plunged between 60 and 70 feet, hitting wave troughs at close to 50 miles per hour.

"The wind was kicking up salt spray, the landing lights were making everything hazy and beyond that it was pitch black, so really I couldn't see anything at first," Buschor recalls. "Fortunately, my night-vision goggles were still attached to my helmet. I wasn't willing to jump without being able to see, so I flipped the goggles back over my eyes, took a deep breath and jumped off the footboard." He fell about 15 feet, inflated his LPUs (life preserving units) and landed on the top of a wave crest.

"In the military you train to the point that it gets boring and monotonous," he says, "but what's amazing is that when you get into a stressful situation, you respond the way you were trained. It's almost like you're on automatic and you don't have to think about what to do next. Once I hit the water, the first thing that entered my mind was to consolidate survival gear and look for other survivors. That's when it became apparent I was going to be doing that the rest of the evening," explains Buschor.

To avoid the risk of being pulverized by the H-60's rotors at the time of impact, Ruvola utilized what's known as a hovering auto-rotation, something like downshifting a car, to slow the rotors by feeding the force of gravity back through the engine. He and Mioli smacked the ocean while still onboard the dead helicopter. Inside the flooded crew compartment, in total darkness and upside down, they had only the air in their lungs at their disposal. Ruvola's HEEDS bottle — a three-minute supply of air strapped to his leg — had been lost when the helicopter hit the water.

“You’re trained in dunker training to always maintain a hand-hold in underwater situations like that,” explains Ruvola. “With that hand-hold you know pretty much where you are in relation to the exits on the helicopter. My primary exit was the pilot-door next to me. I grabbed the handle, turned it and the door opened, thank God.”

Once outside the helicopter, Ruvola was able to trip the LPUs on his vest, which made him buoyant, and shot to the surface. Moments later, he was able to locate Mioli who, without the aid of a survival suit, was already shivering in the frigid water. Ruvola tied himself to Mioli with parachute cord to keep the hypothermic flight engineer as warm as possible. “I took my wet-suit hood from my pocket and put it on Jim’s head to help keep him warm,” Ruvola says.

Eventually, and miraculously, Spillane found Ruvola and Mioli, thanks to emergency strobe lights on Ruvola’s survival suit. Buschor was drifting several hundred yards away already. Smith was nowhere to be found.

The trio clung to each other — and to life — for several more hours. Spillane had broken four ribs, one bone in his left leg and three bones in his right arm. He had also ruptured a kidney and bruised his pancreas. Mioli was fighting to remain coherent in the 60-degree water. Ruvola was trying to help them both.

Out of the maelstrom

Four hours passed in the raging darkness. In that time, the *Tamaroa* managed to navigate the 12 miles to the spot where the H-60 ditched. Twenty-five minutes later, the crew of the *Tamaroa* used its cargo net to rescue the furiously swimming Buschor from seas that, at times, placed him 30 feet above the men trying to save him.

“I couldn’t believe I was on the deck of the Coast Guard cutter,” says Buschor. “I didn’t think I was going to make it, and it was almost an overpowering sensation that I had made it that far. The guys immediately picked me up and threw me inside, cut my clothes off and wrapped me in blankets. I was pleading for something to drink, but they wouldn’t give me anything because they were afraid I might have internal injuries.”

About 40 minutes later and nearly a mile from the spot where Buschor was pulled aboard, Spillane, Ruvola and Mioli were rescued in the same manner — vomiting seawater as they were pulled to the deck. Mioli suffered from severe hypothermia and Spillane was bleeding internally. Though all four would live to tell their stories, their colleague and friend, Rick Smith, was tragically lost at sea.

"Rick was a great guy with a very quiet demeanor — a true professional," says Buschor. "He knew his stuff. Losing him was very hard. What I couldn't fathom was that he was a PJ, yet I made it out alive and he didn't. It is extremely difficult to accept the loss."

Smith, one of the most highly trained survival swimmers in the world, was never located despite nine days of round-the-clock searches by the Coast Guard. ■

Box:

WANT TO READ MORE ABOUT IT?

To read the real-life thriller about the doomed swordfishing boat, *Andrea Gail*, and a more complete account of the heroic efforts of the Air National Guard and the U.S. Coast Guard, read *The Perfect Storm* by Sebastian Junger, published by W.W. Norton & Company Inc. *The Perfect Storm* © 1997 by Sebastian Junger. All rights reserved.

Sidebar 1:

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE STORM ADVISORIES

Small Craft Advisory	Gale Warning	Storm Warning	Hurricane Warning
Winds up to 38 mph	38-54 mph	Up to 73 mph	Winds over 74 mph

Sidebar 2:

FOLLOW THESE NINE TIPS IF A STORM IS NEAR

• Reduce speed and proceed with caution.

• Put on PFDs (personal flotation devices).

• Close all hatches and ports.

• Head for the nearest shore that is safe to approach and duck into the lee (the side away from the direction the wind is blowing) of land.

• Put the bow into the wind and waves at about a 40 degree angle and watch for floating debris.

• Pump out the bilges and keep dry.

• Change to a full fuel tank.

• Secure loose items that could be tossed out.

• Keep everyone low in the boat and near the centerline.

Sidebar 3:

FOUR INDICATORS THAT A STORM IS APPROACHING

• Weather changes generally come from the west, so scan the western sky regularly.

• A sudden drop in temperature and change in the wind often mean that a storm is near.

• A rapid drop in pressure means a storm is approaching. If you have a barometer on your boat, check it every two to three hours.

• Watch for cloud build up, especially rapid, vertically rising clouds.

Pull-quotes:

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